We commend the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for releasing the St. Johns Bayou Final SEIS

By Liz Anderson

We would like to commend the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for issuing the Final Revised Supplemental Environmentsl Impact Statement for the St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway flood control project, even in the face of continued opposition from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Environmental Protection Agency.

At a time when they are beset by negative stories, many of them misrepresenting facts, in the major metropolitan newspapers, when others are yelling to reform their organization, and the environmentalists are screaming for blood -- their blood -- the Corps has stood up for the people they are dedicated to serving.

In this case, us.

We would also like to thank U.S. Representative Jo Ann Emerson for not just going to bat for us, but for doing intense battle for us in Washington during the past three weeks, as she has for so many years and Bill before her.

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The final study report will officially be out Friday. Included in it is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Coordination Act Report (CAR), and they still say nasty things about our flood control project, even though local people have agreed to so many mitigation features it is unbelievable.

They denigrate all of those mitigation features built into this project, smaller ditches, cleaned out from one side only; conservation easements along the ditches with trees on both sides (which we still object to for fear of future maintenance problems), etc., etc., etc.

And don't forget that in order to be able to clean out East Prairie's outlet ditch, the Corps will have to relocate a number of mussels and monitor their welfare for 10 years at a total cost of around $95,000, while avoiding another 9-foot strip of the ditch in the first place because of them.

And the mitigation cropland acres to be purchased and reforested to bottomland hardwood forests by planting acorns is now 8,375 acres, which will almost double the forests in the region. As a comparison, Big Oak Tree State Park is 1,008 acres.

They say starting to operate the pumps at an elevation of 284.4 feet until May 15 "is an improvement in project design over previously proposed alternatives, (but) it falls far short of reducing the significant impact that closing the levee gap will have on the valuable fishery."

That elevation, extended to that date, is a major concession on the part of local interests, and it opens the lower end of the floodway in New Madrid County to the real possibility of additional flooding even with the project in place.

While not much would flood at 284.4, if the rains come before May 15, planting could be delayed substantially while the local water is evacuated by the pump.

To make a long story short, the Fish and Wildlife Service says at the end of their CAR that the only alternative that would satisfy them would be moving the levee closure way up inside the floodway.

Neither of those closure locations can be chosen because they create a negative, overall cost-benefit ratio, and, anyway, if either had been chosen, the lower end of the floodway would have remained flooded, a heck of a result for a flood control project.

To give you a little idea what is in the Fish and Wildlife Service's CAR, here are a few examples.

The Fish and Wildlife Service complains bitterly that the Habitat Evaluation Procedures used in the study process did not give them the results they wanted.

The Habitat Evaluation Procedures were chosen to be used by the interagency team of which Fish and Wildlife Service was a member. They told the Corps to use that methodology.

They said that no studies have been conducted in the St. Johns Bayou documenting the scope and extent of fish movement between the river and the basin and rave on and on about the wonderful biodiversity of the floodway because of its full connectivity to the river.

And yet, the data in a study by SIU in 1998 show that species diversity inside the St. Johns Bayou Basin is better than the species diversity of the floodway. That study found 70 species in the Bayou Basin while only 45 species were collected in the floodway.

There are more fish in the floodway -- more gar, more carp and more gizzard shad -- but there are more species and "better fish" inside the bayou basin.

Why are studies needed to show the scope and extent of fish passage through gates when the fish are there?

There is no way for them to get there except through the gates in the setback levee.

If the species diversity is better in the basin than in the floodway, why is full connectivity with the river such a big deal?

The St. Johns Bayou Basin has partial connectivity with the river due to the gates, and if and when this project is completed, the species diversity inside the floodway may improve as well.

Concerning the new environmental features the Corps is recommending be constructed, the trees on 64 miles of ditches inside the floodway; the wildlife corridor between Big Oak Tree State Park and Ten Mile Pond Conservation Area, the Fish and Wildlife Service said "Although these measures are beneficial, they do not make the project environmentally acceptable".

They did recommend that those measures "be incorporated into the Recommended Alternative".

They stress that this area is the "last remaining connection of the Mississippi River with its historic floodplain in Missouri".

And we're not.

The Little River Headwater Diversion just upriver south of Cape Girardeau is a historic Mississippi River floodplain in Missouri, and it remains connected to the river, the Corps points out in the report.

"Further, it should be noted that other tributaries in the vicinity of the project are currently connected, and will continue to remain connected, to the Mississippi River as well.

"Unless the Service believes that the resources (fish) recognize the difference in Missouri versus Arkansas, Kentucky, or Tennessee, then these areas should be considered valuable as well."

The Little River Headwater Diversion channel to the south of Cape Girardeau has about 6,400 acres of floodplain that is connected to the river. Directly adjacent to the floodway there is Donaldson Point and Island No. 8 that account for 4,700 acres of cleared land plus a similar acreage of bottomland hardwoods.

And don't forget Belmont -- in Missouri as well as Kentucky on this side of the river.

Additional floodplain areas within this reach of the Mississippi River, including Cache River in Illinois, Mayfield Creek in Kentucky, and Bayou DuChein, Obion Creek, Forked Deer River, Obion River, and Hatchie River in Tennessee, provide more than 300,000 acres of non-batture floodplain for the Mississippi River.

And if you are worried that white bass populations in the Lower Mississippi River will be decimated if the 1,500-foot gap is closed, and they can no longer make an occasional spawning run here, you can forget that problem.

According to the Fish and Wildlife Service, white bass "prefers rip-rap and sandbars" for their spawning runs.

The Corps points out that yes, they do prefer riverine gravel bars, and that their "preferred spawning habitat is not available in a backwater environment. Even if white bass are spawning in the floodway, egg survival is probably low because of stagnant conditions that reduce aeration of developing embryos, lack of stable substrates, and high predation rates."

So much for the white bass problem. They'll be better off if they can't take a wrong turn during a flood and end up inside the floodway.

And we don't have any pallid sturgeons either, not even one of the home-grown ones the Missouri Department of Conservation planted in this reach of river several years ago, after they hatched them at Blind Pony Fish Hatchery near Sweet Springs.

They don't like backwater floods either.

The Fish and Wildlife Service then lists a number of different things that should be done if the project proceeds "and is approved, funded and constructed over our objections."

Recommendation 2B: (3) is particularly interesting.

In that recommendation, they say they want us to reforest approximately 7,058 acres of seasonally flooded agricultural lands "that has unimpeded access for river fishes during the reproductive season (i.e. March through June)", but then they go on to exclude land in the St. Johns Bayou Basin and in the New Madrid Floodway, after the gap is closed.

But even that is not enough, they go on and exclude the batture lands as well. That is the land between the levees and bluffs.

Where do they want the mitigation lands to be if not behind or in front of the levees? On top of the levees or in the air?

I give up. Let's get on with the project.

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We particularly liked the Corps' response concerning the Service's recommendation to have someone "conduct an independent, scientific review of the project to resolve the longstanding disagreement between the Corps and the Service concerning the expected environmental impacts of this project, especially relating to wetland and fishery losses."

The Corps said, in conclusion to the response to that recommendation: "The Corps has spent over five years and millions of dollars to collect data and analyze project impacts, has coordinated closely with USFWS and other resource agencies, and has fully reported the results of all analyses.

"The Corps welcomes all comments ***but will not further delay a final decision in favor of additional study and review."*** (Emphasis added)

AMEN